

Hecuba. 424 B.C.

Euripides

Overview

For Greeks, the east was the direction of danger and of the troublesomely unfamiliar. A seafaring but ultimately domestic people, happiest in family or communal lives, such Greek writers as Homer, Aeschylus, and Euripides clung to the west for support and cultural loyalty, more often than not relying on the old polarity of Greeks and Trojans, as a model for the difference between the two elements of what seemed the culture world of the time. Euripides looks with special suspicion on the east, from where two kinds of culture figures were presumed to come: manic and 'Asiatic' forces, like those of Dionysus or Medea; or the diaspora of figures, chiefly female, who emerged into the Greek mainland consciousness as victims set loose by the destruction of Troy, an inexpugnable cultural memory, living in the Greek consciousness to our day—vide, say, Kazantzakis' *Odyssey* (published 1938). Andromache, Hecuba, Medea, and 'the Trojan Women' were central to Euripides' cultural imagination.

Characters

Hecuba,	queen of Troy, widow of Priam
Polyxena,	daughter of Hecuba
Odysseus,	Greek commander
Talthybius,	Greek messenger
Serving woman,	Hecuba's attendant
Agamemnon,	Greek commander
Polymestor,	King of Thrace

Synopsis

The play opens—like *Hamlet*—with a ghost announcing ominous events. Polydorus, the son of the Trojan queen, Hecuba, reveals that, when the Trojans seemed to be losing the fight, he was sent to the reliable King Polymestor, for safekeeping—both for the lad and for a large cache of gold sent with him. Among the foretold prophetic events, to his mother Hecuba, is that Hecuba's daughter, Polyxena, will have to be sacrificed in order to guarantee a safe return for the Greek ships as they make their ways home. (Iphigenia had to be sacrificed to get the Greek navy to Troy, and now another sacrifice is needed to get them home.)!

The remainder of the play tracks the fall-out of the destruction of Troy and the obligatory sacrifice of Polyxena. To her mother's great suffering, Odysseus and the Greek army enforce the demand of Achilles, that Polyxena should die on his tomb. The Greek fleet is thus freed up to return home; the heartbreaking dialogue between Agamemnon and Hecuba is the darkest turning in the play, as is the messenger's account of the sacrifice itself.

At this point the body of Polydorus, whom Polymestor had killed, washes up on shore, and Hecuba realizes that she has been doubly victimized. (Polymestor, as well as Achilles, has killed one of her precious children.) She asks the help of Agamemnon, the Greek commander, in taking revenge on Polymestor, and the remainder of the play is devoted to the dreadful revenge Hecuba takes on Polymestor, then to the carefully weighed decision by Agamemnon, that Hecuba has been justified in her revenge on the Thracian king. The play is of two parts, and concludes that way: the first half devoted to the agony of the sacrifice of Polyxena, the second to the discovery of the corpse of Polydorus, and Hecuba's revenge on Polymestor.

Story

Ghost Polydorus appears as a ghost, announcing to Hecuba that he has been murdered by Polymestor, and that he has been swishing back and forth in the salty brine for three days, waiting to wash ashore. He announces that Achilles will demand a tomb sacrifice of Polyxena, before the Greek fleet is permitted to sail home. Hecuba's threshold level for suffering is rising, as she anticipates the news that both of her children—not to mention her husband and grandchildren—will soon prove to have been victims of the Trojan War.

Mother-daughter Hecuba is made aware that she will need to agree to her daughter's sacrifice, on the tomb of Achilles. Great formal dispute between mother and daughter, the daughter refusing to escape or slip away, true to her nobility, and unwilling to have her destiny dictated either by fools like Agamemnon or heroes like Achilles.

Messenger. The Greek messenger Talthybius undertakes the reporting of the death of Polyxena, whose sacrifice the spirit of the dead Achilles has demanded, as a downpayment on the freeing of the Greek fleet. The bare breasted sacrifice is recounted in chilling detail as Euripides draws out, for his Athenian audience, the explicit evidence of the violence of war—from the Greek side as well as from the Trojan.

Polydorus. Floored by the sacrifice of her daughter, Hecuba is soon to be made aware of the deception played on her by the Thracian king Polymestor, who has had her son Polydorus killed and thrown in the sea. Turning to Agamemnon, the commander of the Greek forces in Thrace, Hecuba draws on the resources of *noblesse oblige*, to request the leader's help in a revenge plot. Hecuba has determined to murder—and as it turns out blind and destroy—the Polymestor who took the life of her son.

Revenge. Hecuba dialogues formally but bitterly with Polymestor, who only gradually realizes that she is out to destroy him, in a terrible revenge. This she accomplishes by having the barbarian king lured into one of the women's tents set up by the Greeks who are holding the Trojan ladies captive. Once Polymestor is seated in the tent, in what he thinks is a guest role, the women emerge to gouge out his eyes and render him the essential lost beast he is. He becomes the helpless male victim, like Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae*.

Polymestor. The Thracian king is left a wretched shadow of himself. He has left behind him, though, a couple of nasty prophecies, which will prove to be accurate. He prophecies that Agamemnon will be killed by his wife Clytemnestra, and that Hecuba will die by drowning.

Themes

Sacrifice. Achilles' corpse requires a sacrifice, it seems, before it will be at peace. Polyxena is the unlucky choice for that role, and her willing acceptance of this gift of herself frees the Greek fleet to continue on its way home. The same kind of sacrifice had been required, at Aulis, to enable the stalled Greek fleet to continue on to Troy. Sacrifice, in these instances, has a representative power to effect large 'regionally religious' change

Suffering. The suffering of Hecuba, the chorus, or of Polydorus the ghost: all these pained conditions are ripe with potential awarenesses, which in themselves open the world to the pained individual. Mustn't we rethink Aeschylus' *pathei mathos*, 'there is wisdom in suffering'? Hasn't it proven to lie at the heart of the human condition?

Deception. Hecuba is stunned by the deception played on her by Polymestor, who has hiddenly seen to the drowning of her son. He has at first refused to admit that her son, Polydorus, was even with the Greeks in the north, but in the end he admits to have seen to the killing of the young man.

Revenge. The second half of the play is devoted to Hecuba's revenge on Polymestor, for having contributed to the murder of her son, and put gold before human values. That revenge is facilitated by

Agamemnon, but the brutal attack on Polymestor is carried out by Hecuba and numerous Trojan slave woman allies of hers. Revenge dominates the second half of the play.

Character Analysis

Hecuba. The main character is Hecuba, the queen of Troy—now a captive of the Greek leader, Agamemnon—and the widow of Priam, the stately father figure whose death marked the downfall of Troy. Hecuba's very life is now wrapped up in her two children (she had fifty originally), Polyxena and Polydorus, both of whom will be dead by the end of the play. Hecuba is staunch enough to deal with the torrent of humiliations and losses, which strike her as a captive of the Greeks. In the end she is vengeful to the max, masterminding the destruction of Polymestor, his eyes gouged out, his life ruined.

Intuitive. Hecuba is of a brooding and intuitive mind, from the first moment we meet her listening to the ghost-speech of her son, Polydorus. She expects the worst, and gets it.

Argumentative. Disputative might be the word, which is to say ready to enter into formal argument, as Hecuba does, when Odysseus attempts to talk her into releasing Polyxena for sacrifice. Hecuba is ready to dispute formally, as are other characters, like Agamemnon, when later he duels in language with Polymestor.

Plotting. As soon as she realizes that Polydorus is dead, Hecuba begins working on Agamemnon, to help her trick and destroy Polymestor.

Deceptive. By the time she confronts the Thracian king, Hecuba has suffered the loss of her daughter, and is prepared to strike back with careful revenge. She sweet talks Polymestor until she has him on her side, and can lead him into the tent where the captive women will destroy him.

Retributive. In her final confrontation with Polymestor, Hecuba shows her delight at the punishment she has inflicted. She is merciless, as she 'has every right to be,' and in her clarity of sentiment perfectly represents the classical moral mindset.

Discussion questions.

From the point of view of stagecraft, how successful is *Hecuba*? Is there a sufficiently unifying thread between the first half of the play, and the second, in which Hecuba directs her attentions to vengeance against Polymestor? Is Hecuba herself the binding thread?

Polymestor himself holds trump cards at the end of the play. He is able to prophecy the death of Agamemnon and Cassandra. Where does he get this power? Is the world of Greek myth a foreordained nexus, from which there is no escape?

Legalistic arguments, as between Hecuba and Odysseus, or Agamemnon and Polymestor, are a regular part of Greek tragedy. Would anything like this kind of one line sparring be acceptable in modern drama? Does it work in Euripides? What kind of audience attitude must we assume, in order to understand why this device was commonly used on the Athenian stage?